

TOWARDS NEW DEFINITIONS OF LITERATURE

I propose to suggest new definitions of literature by way of a discussion of the term "Commonwealth Literature" and a reconsideration of the English canon.

The term "Commonwealth Literature" has been the subject of controversy for over 25 years. There has been an expanding mass of literature written in English outside Britain, mainly by people from the various ex-colonies, many of whom have never been to Britain. There is so much of this literature now that it is beyond doubt a field in itself. In his article "Shaping the language to the landscape",¹ Alastair Niven discusses how best to describe it from his position in Britain and I will do so from my base outside, far away in Sri Lanka. I too find the term "Commonwealth Literature" still useful, though not strictly or always accurate because of the (earlier) exclusion of South Africa and the changing status of Pakistan. "Its punnish assertion of a shared creative prosperity" (Niven) is attractive. More precise is the incorporation of the idea of a commonweal, the literature and criticism in various regions proving mutually beneficial and enriching, and working towards the general good of the whole. In my case, however, the associations of radicalism in the word "Commonwealth" do not operate. Neither do they for Salman Rushdie despite his British education and citizenship.² But it is understandable that these do for an Englishman. The establishment of a Commonwealth in Cromwell's England was important as the only major, and successful, revolt against the monarchy in England. The declaration of a Commonwealth in Massachusetts is important because America was the first British colony to rebel against the mother country and declare independence. The founding of Commonwealths both in Massachusetts and Australia represents a breaking away from Britain by people of the same race and, indeed, originally fellow countrymen.

The term "Post-colonial Literature" has different associations for me and Alastair Niven. Rather than being "too umbilically binding to Britain" (Niven), to me it signifies rupture. Yet it is seriously inaccurate in that this literature not only has antecedents and important developments before Independence and the founding of the Commonwealth of Nations and also traditions, especially in India, reaching back to periods earlier than British, even Western, imperialism.

The term "New Literatures in English" could conceivably appear to be giving "a misplaced emphasis to recent authors" (Niven), but, to me, its point is that it serves to

¹. Alastair Niven, "Shaping the language to the landscape", in *Times Literary Supplement*, September 14-20, 1990.

². Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), p. 68.

differentiate this literature from the old literatures in English of Britain and the United States. The term has the additional virtue in that it covers writing in English outside the former colonies of Britain, say, in Phillipines or South America.

Niven's new term "Anglophone Literature" is not comprehensive but, from one point of view, is accurate in that it refers directly only to the language in which this literature is written (similar to a term like Indo-European), not to a culture or a group of countries or a period. But the term strikes me as arid in its technicality. Moreover, what unites writers in many, if not all, regions is not only the (English) language. They inherit, or share in, similar experiences and influences, similar institutions, similar systems of law and administrations, even the same games. It is a commonplace that English is now the world's language and not just of the English people, but English cannot be treated like much modern technology. It is not a matter of indifference as to whose it was originally. The connection between language and culture is a commonplace but none the less true, and the new Englishes function in a kind of dialectical relationship with British English. Moreover, there are many who feel that the stress only on literature written originally in English is too heavy and limiting. The literature in the vernaculars should be accorded a place. For instance, knowledgeable Indians feel that the literature in their vernacular languages is much richer than that in English, as in the case of Sri Lanka--and is the artistic vehicle for the majority of the people. G.N. Devi observes: "Writers like R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand enjoy global reputations, which are denied some definitely superior writers writing in Kannada (Narayan's language) or Punjabi (Anand's language)."³ Of course, the fact remains that this literature will be generally accessible only if translated into English, given the position of English within countries such as India and in the world. I do not subscribe to the half-blind argument of those who decry *Anglophone* hegemony and plead for the inclusion of vernacular literatures in translation *in English!* The term "Commonwealth Literature" covers literature both in English and in the vernacular.

Each term has its point and its limitations, it is true, but it would not do to dismiss the whole issue:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet.⁴

Terms are important. Given the practical need to structure courses in teaching situations

³ G.N. Devi, "The Commonwealth Literature Period: A Note Towards the History of Indian English Literature", in *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies--Then and Now* ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen & Anna Rutherford (Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1989), p. 60.

⁴ Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Sc. 2.

and to cope with an ever-increasing reading list ('Ars longa vita brevis'), the term chosen could define the nature of the text and the critic's point of view. For instance, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* is 'post-colonial' in its date and issues; Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* could be regarded as 'new literature in English' because of their formal innovativeness; U.R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* is part of 'Commonwealth literature'.

I myself use what is probably the least vulnerable of the terms and also the least fashionable--"Commonwealth Literature". It is particularly those interested in this field and other forms of literature like popular literature, women's and black writing and popular culture who have questioned the traditional canon of English Literature. The 'canon' suggests a body of texts, sacred, select and tested by time. It is significant that F.R. Leavis opened his book *The Great Tradition* (1948) with the considered statement: 'The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad--to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history'.⁵ But the enshrinement of the canon is not a mere literary matter but of treating it as the repository of liberal, humane values and culture, based on the unexamined assumption that these are European or Western and *ipso facto* superior to those of other regions of the world. It is in this larger context that one understands Bernard Lewis' reaction. 'Lewis notes that to tamper with these venerable canons of great books is in fact to threaten "the West" with a good deal more than a modified reading list containing black or female writers. It is, he says portentously, no less than to threaten us with the return of the harem and polygamy, with child marriages, with slavery and the end of political freedom, self-consciousness, and the disinterested pursuit of truth. Only the West, according to Lewis, abolished slavery on its own--one would have thought that slave revolts added some measure of persuasion--abolished polygamy on its own, studied itself and other societies for no other reason than the purest scientific curiosity untainted by profit or the exercise of power.'⁶

The field of criticism in this century was, for long, dominated by critics whose interests were limited to European and American literature. It is symptomatic that arguably one of the greatest critics of this century, F.R. Leavis, wrote only on British and American literature. Late in life, he published a single essay outside this area--on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.⁷ The canon is limited to the West. The liberal values it embodies are also

⁵ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Penguin, 1962, ed.), p. 9.

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Wall Street Journal* editorial, 28 May 1988, quoted from Edward W. Said, "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations" in *From Commonwealth to Post-Colonial*

⁷ See F.R. Leavis, *Anna Karenina and Other Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967).

more specifically connected to class, the bourgeois. This explains why Leavis treats E.M. Forster's works as an expression of these values and is unable to do justice to *A Passage to India* when Forster transcends these and also sets his work outside the West.⁸

Leavis is unable to appreciate a great and *popular* novelist like Thomas Hardy⁹ and it was only very late in life that he was able to come to terms with another such case, that of Charles Dickens.¹⁰

I am critical of the 'Dead White Male's' Canon, its cultural assumptions and values, its restrictiveness and conservatism, but I am not in favour of jettisoning the canon. I do not endorse the assertion that academics like to teach the great books of the Western canon because so much work has been published on them that it is possible to teach them to students without having to think much on one's own about them. This begs many questions. It is true that every rift and vein in a writer like Chaucer has been fully explored so that it is virtually impossible to say anything substantially true and new. Yet it is necessary to teach students Chaucer not merely because they are unfamiliar with, or ignorant of, his work, but because he performs so many artistic tasks perfectly. Of course, teaching Chaucer does not, or rather, should not, mean learning a whole new language, Middle English, but, without this grind, a student can reasonably understand Chaucer and, above all, enjoy him; that is, enjoy great art. Shakespeare is different. No writer has had more books published about his/her *oeuvre* than Shakespeare, yet fresh discoveries await the sensitive reader. Despite the structuralists and post-structuralists, I hold firmly my belief in the central need for judgement in literary study, and the great books should be read and taught. At the same time, one should be open to contemporary works, works from other cultures, writing at different levels and in diverse fields.

It has been argued that a crucial aspect of the subversion of the canon is 'the reconstruction of the so-called canonical texts through alternative reading practices'.¹¹ The classic instance is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Reading 'Commonwealth Literature', the experience and study of colonial and post-colonial processes have alerted us to its colonial significances, and these have been explored of late--by George Lamming¹² and others.

⁸. See F.R. Leavis, "E.M. Forster", in *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952).

⁹. Leavis endorses Henry James' view, "The good little Thomas Hardy"--see *The Great Tradition*, p. 33.

¹⁰. See F.R. & Q.D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto, 1976).

¹¹. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 189.

¹². See Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1988).

But to reconstruct the meaning of *The Tempest* on this basis is to falsify or distort the play. 'The play's the thing'. In the play, the colonial significances are not central. My contention is that there are essentially no different ways for reading different texts or different literatures, though current thinking may sensitise us to neglected signifiers whether of race, class, gender or politics.

One should not divide literature on ethnic, group or sexist lines, and one should not adopt positions which perpetuate such divisions. One should be open to literature from all sections and also from all areas of the world. The criteria for reading literature, studying it, including it in courses, are literary quality as well as its human importance and relevance (not only relevance in its Marxist sense of social engineering). It has been argued that as an implication of decentering English studies, 'what texts from the "tradition" are selected for consideration and study may alter greatly. Kipling and Haggard may well take the place of George Eliot and Hardy, since their relationship to historical and political realities may come to seem more important'.¹³ One should not decide upon one's literary preferences in terms of subject, but one must have room for all these four writers if one finds them humanly important, if they evoke a response from diverse people and in diverse situations. If I were studying literature about India, I would be prepared to accept it from any source, Western or Indian or other, provided it fulfilled my criteria.

This means that critics of "Commonwealth Literature" should not privilege Commonwealth Literature over British and American literature. All literature should meet the same criteria, which are broad and not restrictive and rigid as of old. As Salman Rushdie has said: 'we could discuss literature in terms of its real groupings, which may well be national, which may well be linguistic, but which may also be international, and based on imaginative affinities; and as far as Eng. Lit. itself is concerned, I think that if *all* English literature could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in every conceivable direction'.¹⁴ What I am arguing for is not a mere augmentation of literary texts but a whole new conception of literature and literary studies.

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¹³ Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *Empire Writes Back*, p. 197.

¹⁴ Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 68.